Minimum Force

Airborne Special Reconnaissance in War

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The Need for ASR

On 30 January 2002, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and US forces embarked on Operation Anaconda, the most ambitious and large-scale clearing operation of the war to that date. While considered a tactical victory, the casualties were relatively high, with eight Americans killed in action and another 82 wounded. The coalition forces experienced several problems, mostly the lack of effective coordination between airstrikes and ground forces and ineffective and incomplete reporting of enemy locations. The lack of coordination with intelligence assets on the front lines of a fast-paced modern conflict and the lack of a purpose-built air platform to find the enemy and report directly to frontline troops contributed significantly to the overall confusion and high casualty rate, despite the enemy force's lack of training and sophistication. One case study highlights these issues—the battle of Takur Ghar.

On 3 March 2002, a Special Operations Forces (SOF) team inserted from an MH-47 Chinook helicopter onto a mountain to set up a ground-based observation post, resulting in the loss of three helicopters and seven elite operators. The enemy presence on the hilltop proved significantly higher than expected, as was consistent with the entirety of Operation Anaconda.[1] Immediately after landing with the first portion of the SOF team, the first helicopter came under fire from a fixed heavy machine gun, small arms from at least three separate firing positions, and was struck by three rocket-propelled grenades. One stuck a critical radar system, and the aircraft lost almost all electrical power, including defensive miniguns.

Somehow still able to fly, the pilot elected to leave the landing zone (LZ) quickly before the SOF team could be ripped to pieces by the incoming fire. As the helicopter took off, Petty Officer 1st Class Neil Roberts fell from the open ramp of the MH-47. The pilots landed the barely functional helicopter in the valley below, and Roberts activated his infrared strobe to mark his position for the second Chinook. The second helicopter, aware of the hot LZ, made a combat landing, and the second half of the SOF team quickly left the helicopter and took up cover and concealment in the surrounding trees.

After searching but unable to make contact with Roberts during their advance, enemy fighters discovered the team. Heavy machine-gun fire pinned the team